

Excerpt from JUDGE NOT: A Sam Tate Mystery
By Nikki Stern © 2023

His name was John, aka Jack Frost. He would become the first victim in a multi-state killing spree that put law enforcement on high alert, involved multiple agencies, and placed Sam Tate in the center of the most dangerous case of her career.

Frost never had a clue.

On his last day on earth, the Sacramento homicide detective reported to his precinct as usual. It was a beautiful April morning. He had little on his plate, just one open case. Six months from retirement, he wasn't choosing to rest on his laurels, but if work slowed from time to time, he wasn't about to argue.

Spring fever had taken hold of most of the officers on duty and no wonder. People were finally rid of their pandemic masks and only the surliest naysayers grumbled, "until the next one." Sacramento had a lot going for it—the mountains on one side, the ocean on the other, plenty of entertainment, strong sports teams, and a growing economy. The weeks between late March and mid-June, though, were in a class by themselves, with mild temperatures, plenty of sunshine, and wildflowers in abundance.

Frost stood outside the precinct at midday, indulging in a cigarette and considering his good fortune. He felt content, a state of grace he never expected to reach. Yes, he missed his Ellen. They'd been married twenty years and she'd been gone ten. Memories consoled him, as did the presence in his life of his daughter and her husband, a good man, and their two well-adjusted children.

His professional life had been likewise satisfactory. He loved his work. Fairly routine, except for one case twenty-two years earlier that had briefly made him a statewide celebrity. A perp (Frost still thought of assailants that way) who the media dubbed the Back-To-School Killer had murdered five teachers, two in September, two in January after the winter break, and another following spring break. The women were stabbed in the eye and left in front of three different middle schools, along with black and white notebooks. Some of the bodies were discovered by students arriving early. The community was afraid and outraged.

After the first death, Frost and his partner, Lonnie DeMarco, looked for a connection between the victim and the killer. Maybe he was an ex-boyfriend or husband. Maybe he'd been her student, someone who felt unfairly singled out or ignored in class. Maybe she'd expelled his son.

When the second body dropped ten days later, Frost began to consider the bigger picture. The murderer had a problem with teachers in general. Was he a serial killer? Bodies three and four confirmed it. The California Bureau of Investigation came on to help. Still, no break in the case.

By that time, most of the state knew about the Back-To-School Killer. Officials considered canceling the annual state educators conference, scheduled for downtown. When CBI and local police promised both visible and undercover protection, they relented.

Frost posed as an elementary-school history teacher. He made friends, attended a few lectures, and kept an eye out for anyone out of place.

The second day, he noticed a small man with a large briefcase skulking through the crowded hallways. When the man reached inside to retrieve a piece of paper, Frost contrived to bump into him.

As he'd expected, the contents of the briefcase spilled onto the carpet: a dozen notebooks, a small bottle of chloroform, and a lethal-looking stiletto. The piece of paper contained the names of twelve attendees, all women.

The suspect turned out to be a long-ago student traumatized by a grade-school teacher. He kept his phobia repressed until his daughter became engaged to a professor. The killer confessed on the spot and pleaded guilty in a packed courthouse some months later.

Frost and DeMarco were feted and offered promotions. Each declined, but they agreed to represent the department (along with the chief, naturally) to the media. There was a trip to the Governor's Mansion, a couple of national interviews, and a ceremony where the mayor gave them keys to the city as Frost's proud family looked on.

Nothing remotely as exciting ever happened again. Cancer took both his partner and his wife. His daughter married and moved to Los Angeles. He spent the holidays with his grandkids and tried to imagine a life of retirement. The daughter had it on good authority that security jobs in LA were plentiful, especially for a one-time cop with a headline-making case on his resume.

Frost clocked out at five, picked up Chinese, and headed to his one-story, three-bedroom house. It had always felt a little cramped. Now he rattled around in it. If he sold while the market was hot, he might be able to afford a tiny condo in Los Angeles.

At the edge of nightfall, he heard a knock. He opened the door to a smiling face. "Hi," the visitor said, handing him a black and white notebook.

Frost looked down. Rookie mistake. He jerked his head up in time to see the sharp object pierce his cornea and make its way into his brain.